

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Eliminating Mandatory Specialized Division Rotations in Law  
Enforcement**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

There are traditionally two forms of rotation commonly used throughout law enforcement. These forms are mandatory rotation and performance rotation (Stachnik, 2001). These rotations are more often seen among specialized division positions within police agencies. There are pros and cons offered on both sides of the argument as to whether mandatory rotation of officers is preferred to that of performance rotation.

Performance based rotations is often more involved in that it requires supervision to take a more active role in an officers development and day to day work activities. Whereas under mandatory rotation a predetermined time limit is set and once that time is up an officer simply rotates back out. If officers are not performing their duties in a specialized division, it is the supervisor's responsibility to document their progress, and if need be, remove the officers from the specialized division.

While it can be argued that rotations are more "fair" and allow other officers the chance to excel, the reverse can be argued in that some specialized fields require the expertise of officers who are highly trained and motivated. The cost of training is expensive and not always readily available. Experienced, motivated officers in a specialized division should not be rotated out simply to be fair to others. This pertains to all levels from detective, to supervisor to command staff.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction . . . . .	1
Position . . . . .	2
Counter Position . . . . .	4
Recommendation . . . . .	10
References . . . . .	13

## INTRODUCTION

During the late 1970s the idea of mandatory rotations began (Stachnik, 2001). Since that time, many agencies have battled with the concepts of mandatory rotation versus performance based rotation. Research shows at length the difference between these concepts and how mandatory rotations can negatively impact the effectiveness of a specialized division and police department (Gabor, 1992; Geberth, 1998). Research provides examples of agencies or divisions that have failed due to mandatory rotations. After a review of the research, it becomes evident why the failure and non-implementation of mandatory rotations is so important. The research also shows how rotating command staff and officers too soon can stifle the production of a specialized division, along with the morale and drive of the commander and division (Gocke, 1945).

This topic varies depending on each agency. Some agencies have no mandatory rotation while others rotate out detectives, command staff, or both. The time limit varies from one agency to another. Multiple journals and books point out the negative impact of mandatory rotations ("O'Malley," 1999; Stachnik, 2001).

Law enforcement agencies should eliminate mandatory rotations of its command staff and specialized division to maintain expertise and keep the right people in the correct positions. The continual rotations of command staff and detectives in and out of divisions can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the divisions. These rotations can lead to problems in leadership, morale, continuity and responsibility (Geberth, 1998).

## **POSITION**

There are traditionally two forms of rotation commonly used throughout law enforcement. They are mandatory rotation and performance rotation (Stachnik, 2001). Mandatory rotation is solely based on a predetermined length of time for an officer's assignment to the specialized division. This length of time can be based on a number of months or years, whatever the decided length. Performance rotation is based on the idea that an individual will stay in his/her position as long as they are performing at or above an accepted level (Stachnik, 2001).

Performance rotation also offers benefits and has many supporters. One of the biggest benefits of performance rotations is the expertise level reached by the officers. It has been said that time and experiences are the best resources for developing proficient investigators and supervisors. The effectiveness of an officer's or supervisor's skills developed, and knowledge acquired over time that lead to a person being an "expert" in his/her field is hard to dispute. The complexity of investigations along with the many litigious areas in today's criminal justice system compels agencies to have officers and supervisors in the correct positions.

Performance-based rotational programs determine the detectives' time frame based on their performance (Stachnik, 2001). This method gives detectives or commanders time to increase their skill level and experience overall. The performance based method serves to increase customer service and empowers employees to choose their own destiny (Stachnik, 2001).

Geberth (1998) stated that it takes approximately two years for an officer to become competent as an investigator. The first year is spent becoming accustomed to

the investigative unit. It takes years to gain the contacts or informants and gain the knowledge needed to perform at an adequate level. The time and money invested in these positions and personnel is simply wasted by rotating investigators out simply because their time is up.

Another issue of research in favor of performance rotation is the overall cost to train new investigators. Not only is this a monetary cost but a cost in time. Since it does take a department a year to two years to train a new investigator an agency will constantly be budgeting for training. In essence, by keeping high performing officers in their specialized divisions the agency will be saving money. If there is an issue with performance that should be dealt with by supervision, not simply by rotating an officer out after a mandated time period. Gerberth (1998) stated, "From an administrative perspective, there should be concern about the costs of continually having to train newly assigned officers. It certainly is not cost effective" (p. 195).

In Dungy and Whitaker's (2010) book, *The Mentor Leader*, they talk about what it takes to be a great mentor leader and leading others. In chapter two, they talk about the mindset of a mentor leader. They state, "When it comes to effective leadership, it's not about you and what makes you comfortable or helps you get ahead. It's about other people"(p.22).

The book and chapter continue to talk about how a mentor leader realizes that it is not about him/her (Dungy & Whitaker, 2010). They focus on those working with them and where they will be going together, a common goal. Officers will invest more in one another when they know they will be part of a team for a length of time. Term limits are an unneeded obstacle for the mentor (commander) and the involved officers. Over time

the team or division becomes better able to handle all situations and the department is better as well (Dungy & Whitaker, 2010).

Under mandatory rotations of commanders, the whole concept is to better the commander for further promotions. This is often counter-productive for the agency as command staff being prepped to actually leave an agency instead of enhancing the agency. This concept was proven by the Culver City Police Department, in Culver City, California (Gabor, 1992). The department implemented mandatory rotations of their commanders. Since this implementation, six Culver City commanders, out of a department of 117, have been selected for the position of chief of other departments (Gabor, 1992). The use of mandatory rotations to further a commander's career moves his/her focus away from his/her officers and more onto him/her and what is best for him/her. Instead of focusing on the long term goals of an agency, the commander will simply be filling a vacancy until its time to rotate to his or her next position.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Mandatory rotation has several supporters and does offer some benefits to a department and managers. For managers it is easy to implement as it eliminates discretion in the decision making process. One criticism of mandatory rotation is that a manager no longer has to focus so much on whether an officer is performing to a certain level or having documentation to support that he/she is falling short of this level. The movement to and from the division is based exclusively on time, not performance (Grinder, 2003).

Mandatory rotation does provide many officers and supervisors the experience of being in specialized divisions for a certain period of time. This can often increase the

overall morale of the patrol officer being assigned to a specialized division. Thereby giving the impression that they will be better, more rounded, officers and supervisors. It is also an impartial way of transferring officers and does make some officers feel that it is “fair”.

Officers who know there is a chance to transfer into a specialized division will have increased morale. Morale is an issue in a lot of police departments. Officers often feel there are no transfer possibilities and stagnate in a patrol position. Gabor (1992) stated, “An organizationally sound rotation system will produce high morale, good interdepartmental skill relations, new ideas and a stronger team” (p. 1). Stagnation also leads to morale issues (Gabor, 1992). The longer a person remains in the position they are in with nothing new to challenge them the more likeliness for boredom and stagnation to occur.

The implementation of mandatory rotations can negatively affect morale within a department. The morale of the officers who are assigned to the specialized divisions, along with the morale of the commanders of the divisions, can all be negatively impacted (Grinder, 2003).

The morale of the officers in a specialized division is impacted because they are constantly having a new commander. Each commander comes in and has his/her way of accomplishing things and continually changes little facets of the division, or even major characteristics of the division. The officer feels as though he/she just begins to know what is expected of him/her from the current commander and then a new commander is rotated in and things change, again. The constant change and



uncomfortableness of the job not only affect the morale, but will also affect the production of the officers.

The morale of the commander is also affected. The commander goes into the job knowing that his time is already set, no matter what he accomplishes in the division. He could become the leader that moves the division to the best production it has ever had, yet when his “magical” date comes he will be rotated out of the division.

Knowing this, many commanders begin to feel that it does not matter if they work extremely hard to learn everything about the division and the officers in it or they do just enough to get by. The outcome will be the same. A commander who has no desire or goal of becoming a chief no longer has a career goal. A supervisor will simply make stops along the way and work toward retirement. This has a huge impact on the morale and drive of these commanders.

Gocke (1945) spoke about the importance of morale in a department or unit. Gocke (1945) surmised that the things needed for a proper functioning police department were “well selected and trained personnel, adequate equipment, and a soundly organized structure of administrative command and supervision” (p. 215). Mandatory rotation defeats two of these three. It moves trained personnel too often and the movement of the commanders does not allow for a sound organized structure in the divisions. Gocke (1945) stated, “Morale is to the mind what condition is to the body; it is the fitness of the mind for the task at hand” (p. 215). The drive and motivation an officer or commander puts into his position or division are directly related to his/her morale.

Although there are several examples of morale being a negative factor in mandatory rotation failing, two of the biggest examples are from Baltimore, Maryland

(Hermann & Haner, 1999) and Boulder City, Colorado (Geberth, 1998). Commissioner Thomas C. Frazier came to the Baltimore Police Department from California. Shortly after arriving in Baltimore, Commissioner Frazier implemented the mandatory rotation of detectives every three or four years. Commissioner Frazier wanted to break down the “old boy” network that had controlled advancement to specialized divisions. He argued that this mandatory rotation would lead to a better trained police force and allow more opportunities for others to move into the specialized divisions.

The mandatory rotations lasted approximately six years before they were abolished (“O’Malley,” 1999). The continual rotation of personnel had led to a large decline in highly skilled detectives and deterioration in the morale of the department. The mandatory rotation became almost universally condemned by judges, prosecutors and officers, who blamed it for a wave of retirements and forced removals that decimated specialized divisions.

Prosecutors argued that the new detective’s lack of experience gave ammunition to defense attorneys, leading to acquittals. Over the time period of the mandatory rotations, Baltimore’s clearance rate for homicides dropped from 70% to below 40%. Colonel John E. Garvis, chief of the detective bureau, originally called the mandatory rotations “good for the department” (Hermann & Haner, 1999, para. 2).

However, after the resignation of Commissioner Frazier (to accept another job) and Mayor Martin O’Malley’s abolishment of the rotations, Col. Garvis stated “Rotation definitely crippled us. There were times when we had detectives who had the motives and suspects in their head. That info is invaluable. We need people who know the culture of the city” (Hermann & Haner, 1999, para. 9).

Around 1992, the Illinois State Police conducted an experiment in the voluntary cross training of non-supervisory positions and the mandatory cross training of selected supervisors. The experiment lasted approximately four years and was terminated when the state police found it to be ineffective. According to Lt. Hinchy, “one of the biggest flaws in the experiment was that it failed to take into account the fact that not all people have the ability, or desire, to do all things” (Stachnick, 2001, p. 10).

There is also the point that the mandatory rotation of motivated, effective employee’s causes the employee unneeded stress, frustration, needlessly damages morale, and ultimately thwarts a promising career and at the same time undermines the effectiveness of a specialized division (Stachnik, 2001).

Under mandatory rotations many officers and supervisors feel that there is little room for professional growth and this leaves them feeling that they do not have options for career goals. In an article written by Vernon J. Geberth (1998), he talks about mandatory rotations. He states that some officers and supervisors may have the outlook of, “why bother to learn all of this information if I’m going to be leaving soon” (para. 8). They feel as though they are being demoted. The fact that their performance may have been superior while in the specialized division does not matter, because their arbitrary date has arrived to rotate back to patrol.

Geberth (1998) goes on to state, “Agencies that have rotated their personnel or decentralized their homicide units have lost their most valuable commodities; experience, knowledge, and continuity” (para.15). Some agencies look at fairness as allowing multiple officers within an agency the opportunity to enhance their careers by being able to experience different sections of the agency. Some may look at this as an

overall investment into an officer. As stated by Cheraskin and Campion (1996), “the cost associated with rotation can lead employees to view it as an investment by the organization in their training” (para. 22). There is a sense of fairness when everyone is allowed to rotate throughout different divisions of an agency. Marvin (1998) indicated that officers who work only patrol throughout their careers are not being used to their full potential, and this “reduces their value to the agency and to the community by not providing them with a well-rounded knowledge of various divisions” (para. 4). This approach would make it equitable for all officers involved to have the same opportunity to serve in a specialized division and gain valuable knowledge. When these officers return to patrol they would take that skill back with them. In all fairness, this would be what’s best for the department.

Continuity is closely tied to specialized divisions and their integral working components. To have true leadership supervisors must build a solid trusting relationship with their personnel. One way to help build increase continuity and build positive morale is to eliminate unfavorable conditions. Those may be constant shifting of personnel from one job to another or poor leadership among supervisory officers (Gocke, 1945).

As stated earlier, specialized divisions are often small groups or teams. For a team to be successful, they must all be on the same page and moving toward one goal. Without this continuity new commanders and officers rotate in and out and supervision will spend extra time training and trying to get them “up to speed.”

## **RECOMMENDATION**

While mandatory rotation appears on paper to be a fair and equitable way of training all officers and preparing supervisors for administrative positions, that is only one side of the equation. The officers or supervisors who have a goal of getting to a certain division and becoming an “expert” in this field, due to their passion about it, are left rotating around the department or are on patrol operating half-heartedly due to the huge loss of drive and morale. The solution is clearly to find that balance that allows for continued movement in the department and for a smooth, highly productive unit in the specialized divisions. Mandatory rotations decrease morale, effectiveness, continuity and overall performance of both officers and supervisors (Geberth, 1998). Experienced and well trained officers re-assigned to patrol from their specialized units negatively impact the agency with the cost of training new officers. The time and effort needed to train new officers negatively impacts the agency as well as case-loads and services to the citizen are impacted. Gerberth (1998) stated, “Rotation impedes career growth and frustrates professional ambition” (p. 195).

In a mandatory rotation process, the responsibilities often become focused on that of a personal level and not a professional or departmental level. The officers are focused on just what they need to learn to accomplish the job, not “master” the job or become “experts”. The supervisors become focused on similar objectives. They will learn “just enough to be dangerous” about a division and then move on. Supervisors are expected to be the leaders and managers of their respective division. They are looked upon as the “head” of the division and should have the knowledge needed and relied upon for a smooth functioning unit. Under mandatory rotation supervisors will

never reach this level of expertise and knowledge, leaving them as a “figurehead” of a division.

It is up to upper management to decide whether the focus should be on putting the right, properly trained people in the right job or considering the actual cost in time and money to train new officers. The value of maintaining expertise in a field over-rides allowing personnel to transfer into a specialized division just to make it fair for all involved. Performance rotation, when contrasted with mandatory rotation, will enhance customer service, increase employee empowerment, and provide greater efficiency and effectiveness for the department (Stachnik, 2001).

Continuity speaks volumes among the rank and file. There are arguments on both sides as to whether morale is increased or decreased by mandatory rotations. Who is right or wrong truly depends on what research it looked at. The vast majority of research is about equal as to which form of rotation is best. Each department needs to closely study what is going to work for them. What may work in a larger department might not work for a smaller department. In some smaller departments, a case is worked from start to finish by the initiating officer.

This research focused on the larger agencies that have the resources to have multiple specialized divisions within its department. The debate between mandatory rotations and performance rotations has gone on for decades. Many agencies face the same problems of low morale, cynicism, poor communication and distrust of the management system. These problems often occur due to the organization focusing on the process (mandatory vs. performance) more than the personnel who are working within the process (Grinder, 2003).

Rotations in Baltimore were “universally condemned by judges, prosecutors and officers, who blamed it for a wave of retirements and forced removals that decimated specialized units” (“O'Malley,” 1999, para. 18). The focus should be on people-oriented leadership and building employees up. The ultimate goal should be placing the right employees in the right spot for the betterment of the division, department, and agency.

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